

# Perspective

## *The American POWs:* **THEIR GLORY IS ALL MOONSHINE\***

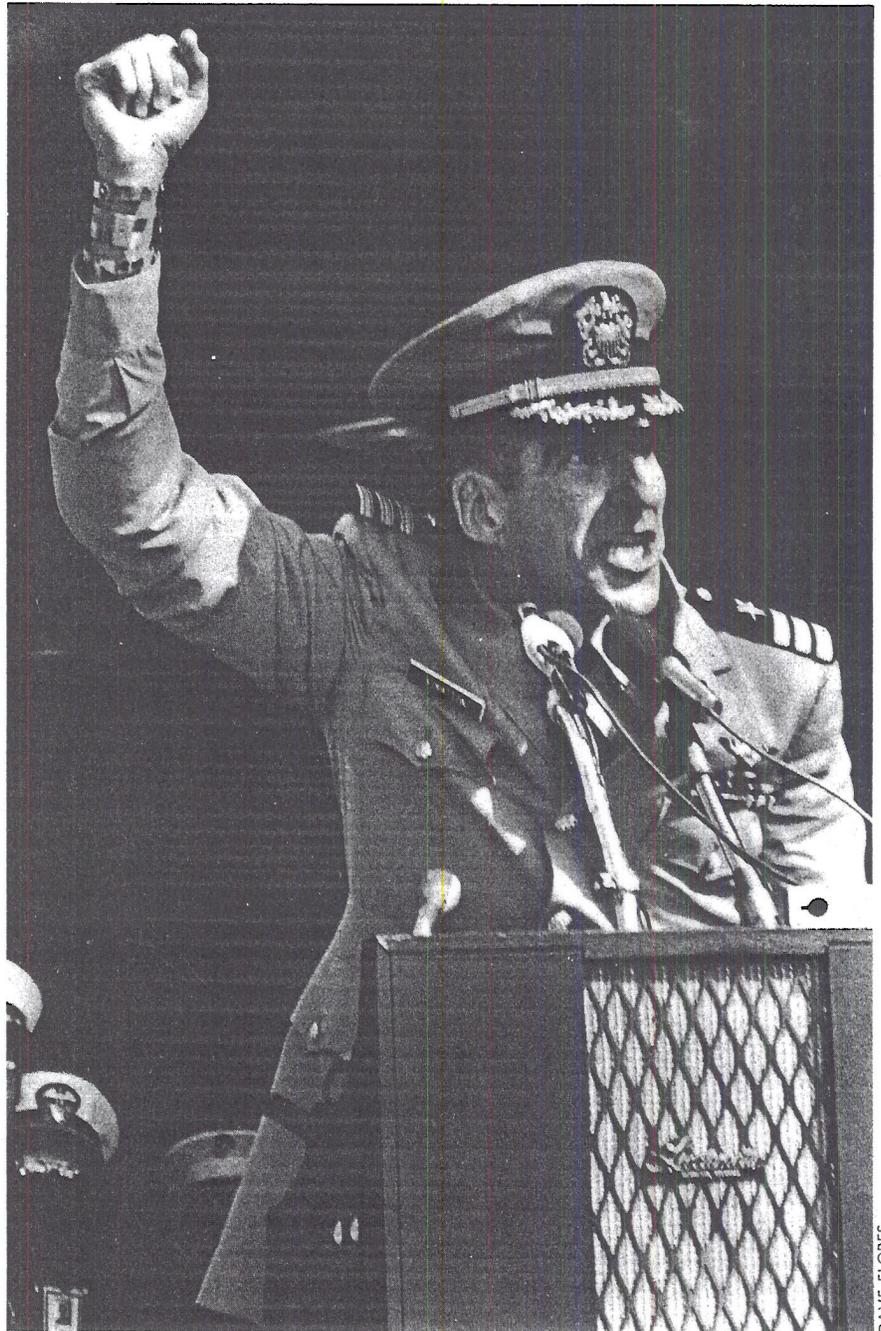
by Ngo Vinh Long

American POWs have been welcomed back to "The World," as they call it, with "little touches," tax-free bonanzas, and much fanfare. The "little touches" have included kisses from flight nurses, cakes baked aboard, American cigarettes chewing gum, "Halloween bags" of candy, and "very fancy flowered towels." The tax-free bonanzas come in the form of cold cash, grab bags of gifts, and special job offers. And the fanfare goes on every day with marching bands, press conferences and live TV coverage. All this joy prompted Howard K. Smith of ABC to comment that the attention and care paid to the POWs proved the great humanity of the American people. Once again he condemned those who refused to acknowledge this national quality of munificence. His sentiments are shared by many Americans.

Some, to be sure, have pointed out that this great American humanity has been extended only to a rather select group of professional soldiers and civilian personnel while those Americans who bore the brunt of this war, the veterans, have been at best subjected to "benign neglect." Moreover, the celebrations have served to cover up and justify the inhumane policies of the United States against the Indo-chinese people—the gooks, the dinks, the slant-eyes, the Oriental human beings. The TV networks, indeed, paid almost as much attention to the dog brought back from Hanoi by a POW as they have to political prisoners in South Vietnam.

*\* I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell.*

—William Tecumseh Sherman



Ex-POW, Commander Richard A. Stratton

DAVE FLORES

There is no doubt that on the personal level there is a need to forgive and forget after a war. And nobody understands this more than the Vietnamese themselves. But the very way in which the United States treats its POWs as heroes suggests that it is proud of their actions and the criminal policies of the U.S. government. And,

indeed, the POWs themselves have scarcely been inclined to recant their complicity in war crimes. Col. Robinson Risner, for example, was quoted

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by the *New York Times* (February 27, 1973) in support of President Nixon's handling of the war—including the saturation raids last Christmas against Hanoi, Haiphong and other populated areas of North Vietnam. The colonel recalled: "On the 18th of December—I think that was the first night of the B-52 raids—there was never such joy seen in our camp before. We knew they were B-52's and that President Nixon was keeping his word and that the Communists were getting the message. . . . They at last knew that we had some weapons they had not felt, and that President Nixon was willing to use those weapons in order to get us out of Vietnam."

Whether, in fact, the bombing hastened the return of the American POWs is a highly debatable question. Asked about this at his January 24 press conference, Kissinger said that he did not "want to speculate on North Vietnamese motives; I have too much trouble analyzing our own." In any event, Col. Risner and his friends were overjoyed because as pilots they understood full well the destructiveness of the B-52's. Each B-52 typically car-

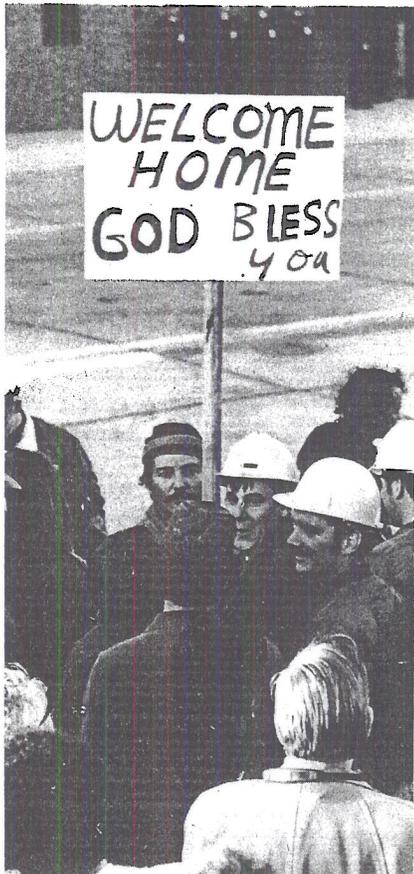
ries about 20 tons of 500-pound bombs. It flies at an altitude of 30,000 feet and drops bombs which cover "a rectangle a mile and a half long and a half mile wide with flames and flying steel fragments." (*New York Times*, December 26, 1972.) If there is no overlap, 100 B-52's can thus destroy an area of about 34 square miles, or 32,000 acres, in a single mission. During the 11-day bombing, over 100 B-52s and several hundred fighter bombers devastated North Vietnam 24 hours a day. By December 24, the sixth day of the bombing, about 40,000 tons of munitions had been dumped on the populated areas of the Red River Delta of North Vietnam. The area cratered by the bombing in these first few days was equal to that which would be devastated by about one hundred Hiroshima bombs.

The Red River Delta is North Vietnam's heartland. Some 12.5 million people live there in an area of about 3 million acres. In this region is located most of North Vietnam's farmland and here most of its food is produced. Here, too, is where the danger of floods during the rainy season is

greatest, a danger prevented only by a dike system painfully constructed over a period of a thousand years.

The captured American pilots certainly knew the importance of the Red River Delta: for years they had bombed the area. No doubt they understood the results of the brutal onslaught over the Christmas vacation when hundreds of people died, thousands of homes were devastated, and whole cities such as Bac Giang totally destroyed. According to Col. Risner, they greeted this destruction with unprecedented joy.

As for the civilian POWs, almost all were operatives of the Agency for International Development (AID) and in Vietnam, AID is inseparable from the CIA. Its funds have furnished torture chambers, built prisons, supplied the Saigon police, and assassinated political opponents of the Thieu regime. These Americans are hardly innocent do-gooders. Consider, for example, Douglas K. Ramsey, whom Peter Arnett and Seymour Hersh have written up with almost ob-



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sequious reverence. He served as right-hand man to the late John Paul Vann, another American whom the *New York Times* has treated with deep respect.

Often described as the most effective civilian operative in Vietnam, Vann was widely considered the most cruel by opponents of the Saigon government. He specialized, among other things, in "black propaganda," which involved him in murder, forgery, and outright deception of the American press in order to discredit the NLF, in particular, and the opposition to American intervention, in general. For example, just before his fatal helicopter crash, Vann fed the newspapers a story about two Catholic priests said to have been executed by the NLF. When the archdiocese of Saigon protested vehemently against this lie, the *New York Times* printed a tiny retraction on page 8 of their May 13, 1972 issue.

In any event, Douglas Ramsey worked for Vann in Hau Nghia. He was an important operative in part because he spoke Vietnamese well (a facility he attributed to his training as

an opera singer). Vann put him in charge of numerous programs, including the so-called "counter-terror" program, predecessor to the Phoenix program which resulted in the execution of 40,000 civilians, according to Saigon statistics. In this capacity, Ramsey personally led his men on nighttime raids which were intended to cause death and destruction and which might later be blamed on the "Communists." This personal involvement supposedly generated Vietnamese confidence in him and, in turn, won him the respect of the Americans. Consequently, after his capture by the NLF in January 1966, the Americans time and again sought to obtain his release. Tens of thousands of dollars were offered as a reward, and the U.S. tried repeatedly to exchange him for NLF prisoners, and even for other Americans. Ramsey's "achievements" became well-known to many Vietnamese, and he reportedly expected that he would be executed after his arrest. However he never even suffered physical abuse, although he says that "there were definite threats to make an example" of him because his captors believed that he was "a high-level CIA agent with the blood of thousands of Vietnamese on my hands." A foolish point: the NLF knew of his criminal activities whether he was a high-level CIA agent or not.

Not only have the POWs been used to obfuscate the real nature of American policies; not only have their criminal acts been glorified: in addition, the prisoners have had the gall to insinuate mistreatment by their Vietnamese captors and to attack the antiwar movement and McGovern liberals for serving as a "source of strength" to North Vietnam, thereby prolonging the war and the POWs' captivity. In a way, the charges of maltreatment may be understandable. Nixon needs to save face (in April 1971 he said that the North Vietnamese "without question have been the most barbaric in the handling of prisoners of any nation in history"). Then, again, the POWs are anxious to gain as much sympathy as possible. Hence the statements about having been "forced" to make antiwar announcements, although no details have been given for fear that they may "endanger the release of the prisoners" still in the hands of the DRV and the

NLF! Douglas Ramsey, for one, recounted the pressure to which he was subjected: "I was told that all statements were voluntary and then reminded that I had received good treatment, including medicines and vitamins." Even if the rhetoric should escalate after all American prisoners have been released, this will neither pose a very substantial problem for North Vietnam nor alter the reality about the treatment of the POWs: no American POWs coming back from any previous war have been as healthy as these prisoners. In no other war have POWs been officially permitted to organize while in captivity, nor have they been allowed "daily cups of juice and milk"—nourishments which are reserved for babies of privileged families in Vietnam.

What is perhaps more dangerous is the POWs' attempt to denigrate, in the words of Col. Risner, "the people who were downing or bad-mouthing our Government and our policies." The prisoners' praise of Nixon for bringing them home with honor lays the groundwork for the attacks that are to come. How destructive this repression will be depends largely on the efforts of concerned Americans to clarify the basic issues of the Vietnam war. So far, however, many liberals are so intimidated they have not dared challenge even the most blatant lies from the White House.

This situation has made it possible for Nixon to announce publicly time and again that his Administration recognizes the Thieu regime as the sole and legitimate government of South Vietnam, on the one hand, while denying any responsibility for the sabotage of the Agreements by the Thieu regime, on the other. The Nixon Administration may have abandoned all hope of retaining control of South Vietnam, but it has not abandoned its goal of making South Vietnam a lesson and a warning to other countries in Southeast Asia, and possibly in Africa and South America. The price for opposing an American-supported regime is wanton destruction of the country. If, by some miracle, the rebellion is winning—as the Vietnamese people are winning—then the U.S. will sabotage attempts to reconstruct the country and carry out new programs.

Ramsey, POWs 14 Feb 73  
Vann, CIA 9 Jun 72

Thieu has, in fact, repeatedly and flagrantly violated the ceasefire. According to the *New York Times* (February 28, 1973), "... the South Vietnamese Government has continued to fight to regain all positions it lost just before the ceasefire and ... it has continued to seek and attack Communist units wherever it could find them." The Thieu regime has put the DRV and PRG members of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission under virtual house arrest, and denied permission to talk to them. Meanwhile, a Canadian officer reports that in some cases Saigon authorities have threatened to shoot any PRG officer who attempts to visit the Commission headquarters in Saigon-controlled areas. (*New York Times*, March 7, 1973). All this has enabled the Saigon regime to commit gross violations of the Agreements. For example, the Saigon regime claimed to have released about 20,000 civilian prisoners and about an equal number of PRG POWs as of early February. Since this was done without the verification and participation of the Commission, the Thieu government was, in effect, declaring that it is no longer accountable for the whereabouts of about 40,000 persons. It claims that these people have switched their political allegiance—a preposterous lie. On the one hand, the figure of 40,000 is about 30 times larger than the number of prisoners set free last year under the "open arms" program. Then, again, why did Thieu not release them at the time they supposedly switched sides? In all likelihood, many of these prisoners have been assassinated, because they would pose a potential threat to the Thieu regime if they were released. Details of tortures "more sadistic, more barbaric than ever," wholesale machine-gunning of political prisoners, starvation and deliberate infection of prisoners with fatal diseases are all revealed in letters recently smuggled out of South Vietnam's prisons.\* These actions constitute a gross violation of Article 8 of the Protocol on the Prisoners signed by the four parties, section (b) of which states:

*All Vietnamese civilian personnel captured and detained in South*

\* See the January and February issues of *Thoi Bao Ga*, the monthly newspaper of the Vietnam Resource Center in Cambridge.

*Vietnam shall be treated humanely at all times, and in accordance with international practice.*

*They shall be protected against all violence to life and person, in particular against murder in any form, mutilation, torture and cruel treatment and outrages against personal dignity. The detaining parties shall not deny or delay their return for any reason including the fact that captured person may, on any ground, have been prosecuted or sentenced. These persons shall not be forced to join the armed forces of the detaining party.*

*They shall be given adequate food, clothing, shelter and the medical attention required for their state of health. . . .*

Section (a) of Article 7 defines civilian prisoners "to mean all persons who, having in any way contributed to the political and armed struggle between the two parties, have been arrested for that reason and have been kept in detention by either party during the period of hostilities." However, according to the Feb. 25-March 3 issue of *The Asian*, a Hong Kong weekly newspaper,

*Reports from all over South Vietnam indicate that the government of Nguyen Van Thieu has embarked on a massive "reclassification" of political prisoners, moving them into the ranks of criminal offenders. Thus the thousands of jailed anti-Thieu politicians, intellectuals and students would be excluded in any mass release of political detainees.*

Such "reclassifications" are in clear violation of Section (b) of Article 8 quoted above.

So far, the U.S. has absolved itself of all responsibility in this regard. The silence of the Nixon Administration bespeaks its intention to let Thieu sabotage the agreements.

This is precisely the reason why, on February 27, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) announced the temporary freeze in the return of American POWs. Contrary to reports in the American press, the DRV has never used the prisoners as a lever for gaining concessions from the U.S. On the contrary, it has maintained a consistent position: POWs are exchanged only when the war is ended. Thieu's

violations of the ceasefire agreement suggest that the United States and Saigon are not yet ready to end the war. Therefore, by temporarily suspending the return of American POWs, the DRV wanted to force Washington to state clearly—on the eve of the International Conference on the Vietnam situation—whether it intended to abide by the terms of the Agreements or go on waging war. We do not know the American reply to this question, but we do know that, even at the present time, Thieu has not agreed to release NLF POWs—let alone political prisoners—at the specified rate. If the negotiations with Thieu collapse in the next month or two, there is no guarantee that there won't be great political upheavals in South Vietnam. Such a situation would only lead Thieu to increase repression. Already, his police force is 300,000 strong, paid with U.S. money and trained by U.S. advisers, in clear violation of Article 5 and Article 9 of the Agreements.

In the event of upheaval, how would the various parties react? If the PRG has to meet force with force, what would Nixon do? Thieu has called for the resumption of U.S. bombing should the ceasefire break down. Meanwhile, Kissinger, Richardson and other American officials have stated that it is "impossible and undesirable" to rule out such re-intervention. Presumably such a turn of events would be most "possible and desirable" after the last American POWs and GIs have returned to the United States. But then, as one Vietnamese official remarked, the American POWs have been released "as rapidly as they were captured." Who is to say that—60 days after the signing of the Paris Agreement—American POWs won't be captured just as fast as before?

Americans who don't want there to be any more American POWs, and Americans who sympathize with the Vietnamese POWs as much as they do with their own, would be well advised to pressure the Nixon Administration to abide by the Agreements and withdraw support from the Thieu regime. Thieu has prolonged the suffering of the American and Vietnamese peoples too long already. That responsibility is clearly his—and not the antiwar movement's, as the POWs would have us believe. ■